

How Important is Your Past?

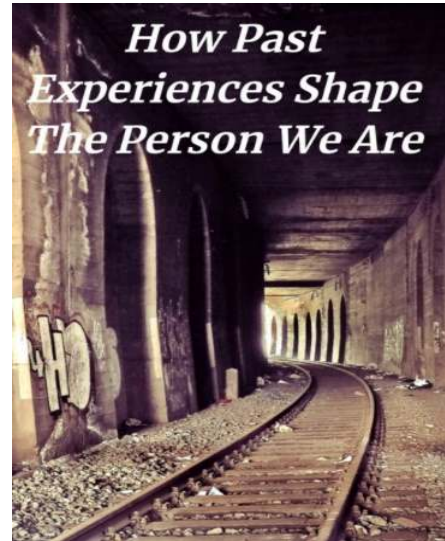
“You shouldn't chase (anudhāvati)¹ after the past or place expectations on the future. What is past is left behind. The future is as yet unreached. Whatever quality is present you clearly see right there, right there. Not taken in, unshaken, that's how you develop the heart.

Ardently doing what should be done today, for who knows? Tomorrow death? There is no bargaining with mortality. Whoever lives thus ardently, relentlessly both day and night, has truly had an auspicious day.”²

At first blush, it appears that the Buddha's admonition is to forget the past and not chase after it. But, as is all too often the case in our modern Age, we should not take this statement as an explicit solution. The operable word in the Buddha's teaching is “chase.” Our past is an integral part of human life and influences who we are in the present. Buddha is not saying that the past is of no consequence, he is saying that to “chase” after the past, whether desiring to repeat it or run away from it, is the wrong path (kummagga³).

Considering that for the rest of his life, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths, the purpose of which is a formulaic method for correcting the effects of past experiences that influence our present life. The past is not merely forgotten and swept under the proverbial rug.

Any person who grew up with parents that were substance abusers or who suffered **any** abuse as a child, will attest to the fact that to simply forget the past, merely put it aside, is trying to pretend that nothing happened. We are not always cognizant of the things that have influenced our present perceptions or behavior.



Most Dhamma teachers will tell you that the Buddha is correct, we shouldn't dwell in the past or chase after it sentimentally. Often times the struggles we encounter while trying to learn meditation or integrate the Buddha's teachings into our life, remnants of our past arise and influence us, sometimes in very negative and unbeneficial ways.

You are determined, but moving forward, integrating the teachings can seem impossible at times, and whether you are aware of it or not, there may be elements of your past that are hindering your progress. Buddha taught very specific elements of what chasing the past means:

“And how does one chase after the past? One becomes carried away with the delight of, 'In the past I had such a form (body)'... 'In the past I had such a feeling'... 'In the past I had such a perception'... 'In the past I had such a thought-fabrication'... 'In the past I had such a consciousness.' This is called chasing after the past.”⁴

¹ Anudhāvati: *Pali*: अनुधावति Def: “(anu + dhāv + a) runs after; To run up to ; to pursue; to chase, follow, https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=chase+after&matchtype=default

² Buddha: Bhaddekaratta Sutta: <https://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.131.than.html>

³ Kummagga: *Pali* कुम्माग Def: “a wrong path (lit. and fig.) Kummaggaṃ paṭipajjati to lose one's way, to go astray.”

⁴ *Ibid*

Carefully reflecting on this teaching, you will realize the wisdom in what the Buddha **did not** say. Buddha understood that all humans have the propensity to try to repeat the pleasant memories and block out the unpleasant ones.

Buddha is not talking about a disintegration or obliteration of your past experiences and memories. Rather, he is teaching that there is a way to obliterate the harmful effects, misconceptions and incorrect perceptions that cause us to remain in a state of unaware ignorance.

By cautioning us about “dwelling” on the past, he is acknowledging and emphasizing the importance of it. “Whatever quality is present you clearly see right there, right there.” Whatever, you are experiencing in the instant, the moment you think on something, is where the “quality” or “characteristic” is...right there! This “seeing,” he says, is how we develop heart. In other words, through understanding and comprehension we are able to develop the courage (heart) to examine our past experiences in a beneficial way. The only way, the single only way that we can achieve this is to pay attention.

Are You Chasing Your Past or Is Your Past Chasing You?

It is generally agreed upon that what has passed cannot be changed or influenced. However, we don’t always have a good grasp on the fact that everything in life is impermanent. We try our darnedest to repeat and keep the pleasant experiences alive, only to become disappointed when we do not succeed.

Our memories remind us that the past doesn’t exist in the present except in our memories, but this doesn’t stop us from trying to resurrect the pleasant memories for our enjoyment. We also retrieve bad, unpleasant and ugly memories when it is expedient to do so, such as in an argument for the purpose of placing blame on others. We have definite ideas of how things should be, but we hesitate to accept that nothing stays the same.

We become aggravated and frustrated when we realize that our past, alive in our memories, effects your emotions, our mental state of mind, and our behavior. And it is for this reason that the Buddha focused on training the mind (the thinking) so that we don’t repeatedly experience the discomforts and pain that our memories can cause.

So, the difficulty about dealing with our past resides with our brain-memory. We associate memories with emotions, and so our ability to let go of the events of our past, good and bad, becomes difficult. Realistically speaking, the past is merely a record of images and emotions we experienced at the time of certain events, again, both good and bad. Many times, the details of events are not always correct, particularly as our memories become fuzzy as we age. We employ those memories to create perceptions, which are rarely accurate.

How then are we to let go of these capsules of memory that seem to haunt us? One word: Meditation. Buddha taught that meditation was an imperative practice for one to move forward toward any stage of awakening. First, we have to learn how to meditate properly. Once we do so, then we are able to focus on specific elements of our being in order to fully understand the truth about the nature of ourselves. Meditation decreases frustrations, worries, and distress. However, meditation is the sole method for abolishing ignorance, wrong thinking, false concepts, incorrect perceptions, and how these intrude on our efforts to practice.



We all agree, the past is the past, right? or is it? Why does it seem as though our past comes back to haunt us at the most inopportune times? Our memories remind us of the awful things we said or did to someone; even to ourselves. Why do some memories hurt us emotionally and some physically? How is it then that we might be cheating our future with our past? We certainly don’t disparage the pleasant memories from visiting us once and a while.

The key is of course to acknowledge a pleasant memory as simply just that; a pleasant memory. We can enjoy our pleasant memories freely. However, we can also become trapped by them by grasping or clinging to them, causing ourselves distress through longing, hoping, wishing, and lamenting about some loss.

The pithy aphorism at the beginning of this section, doesn't really define what the past is that is cheating your future; the message seems somewhat ambiguous. However, in the context of learning meditation or other Dhamma-related practice, by reliving or keeping the past alive, you inadvertently hinder your progress. For example: How is it possible to practice metta (loving kindness) when you continue to harbor ill-will, bad feelings or grudges against another? How can one develop compassion for someone for whom you hold old resentments?



We create our own hindrances by clinging to things that happened in the past; things we did or did not do. By keeping these things alive, allowing them to affect our present state of being, causes our past to chase us. We have to first learn to put these memories in the right place, meaning we may have to develop different perspectives. Coming to terms with something generally means making-an-effort to understand, accept, and deal with a difficult or problematic person, thing, memory or situation.

Elements of Your Past

Since nothing **outside** of your own life; your own experiences; your own thinking, can either cause nor be responsible for your happiness, this leaves you with just a single source for happiness. **You.**

Considering this to be true, the importance of your past is determined by how much you drag it around with you from day to day or year to year? What are the elements of your past causing your inability to focus, concentrate or become happy? We can acknowledge that the tensions of daily living causes stress. But, does the stress of daily life really have that much to do with our ability or inability to be happy? Actually, not really.

In many respects our past experiences influence how we perceive our daily lives. And yet, sometimes it seems as though we have no choice in the matter, our past seems to dog us at every turn. Regardless of how much we might try to hide from our past; bury it in the shrinking clock of a busy-busy lifestyle or try and ignore it, the effects of it are always there. Our past can dog us whether we cling to pleasant memories or are affected by negative things that happened to us. Either way, elements of our past are not always easy to identify.

Teaching meditation classes, I come into contact with people who have difficulty focusing on their breath without annoying or disruptive thinking. Sometimes these thoughts are superfluous, such as whether or not you remembered locking the door or shutting off the lights before leaving your house. But, after the meditation session, there is an open question and answer period. People speak of things that affect their ability to focus on the breath. Many of these things involve elements from the past, both near and long-past. Most commonly are issues regarding childhood. I suspect that many people have some issues that stem from childhood, but are not aware of what those issues are nor how they are affected by them.

Past memories that affect your present life, need to be discovered and put into proper perspective; a perspective that releases you from the influences of past elements. Identifying things from the past that influence you needn't always be difficult, particularly if the events were intense, traumatic or really pleasant. However, discovering the connections between events that created the memories, and how they influence your present life, takes determination and focus.

This is the very formula behind the **First Noble Truth**, which is not merely the naming or labeling of past experiences that created the memory in the first place, but ‘how’ the memories influence your present perceptions and cause suffering.

In our present Age, a lot of people are under the impression that in order to come to terms with our past, we need a psychologist or psychiatrist. While this may be necessary for persons with specific mental afflictions, most of our past memories, good or bad, can be revealed and dealt with through focused reflection. Two things are needed to accomplish this: focused determination and willingness.

Following are two examples of people whose past experiences remain and influence on their daily lives.

“I was just a stupid teen, I didn't really think about anyone other than myself. I kinda understand myself, I had a really dysfunctional family. I heard my parents arguing every day. My dad hit my mom occasionally. They divorced when I was really little, didn't see my mom much. They were using me to hurt each other after the divorce, and stuff like that.

They are good people though, they just didn't know any better at the time. But, I guess that all led up to me acting up as I was growing up. I'm 20 now, so it's good that I realized some things. I'll definitely need to redeem myself for all the bad things that I did. But, the plan is: to forgive myself first, then I'll gather up the courage to apologize to some individuals.”⁵

In the case above, it's clear that this person's past weighs on his present ability to be happy and to integrate the cause of his feeling of guilt. I want to remind the reader that when I speak of ‘happiness’ I am not referring to joy. Happiness is a deep experience that has long-term effects, while joy is a temporary emotion that is experienced in the moment.



While this aphorism contains some truth, it is the present which is of importance, for it is within the present; this moment, that the past influences can be identified. Following is a good example of

how past events remain with us, influencing why we act, how we act, and how we evaluate ourselves and our lives.

“I have some things from the past that really bother me, whenever I remember them, I feel awful. There are some smaller things like hurting women (emotionally) from middle school through high school, and there are bigger things.

I took money from a guy so I wouldn't beat him up. I went to a guy's school and took him to a drug dealer that he owed money to against his will.

I was collecting money for "charity" but it was for myself. When I was doing drugs, I made a fool out of myself, many times, like going to my ex's high school and threatening a teacher. I threatened my family. And many other stuff.

So, how do I fix all that? Is that even possible? Should I apologize to those women? What about charity fraud? How do I fix that? If someone can give me advice, any advice, I would really appreciate it.”

Historians are one group of people who understand the importance of the past. They understand that our sociological characteristics are very much linked to who we were in the past. This fact is evident in the stories of these two people whose adolescent behavior has shaped their present perspectives. These two examples clearly show how the events of the past cause their present stress. Our past provides us with an idea of ‘why’ our experiences influence our present perceptions, the real task is to identify ‘how’ it is that those past experiences influence the present.

⁵ https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/md2wig/things_from_the_past_that_still_haunt_me/

Beware of Aphorisms and Idioms

Aphorisms have an intrinsic flaw or weakness. While making a concise statement of some principle, even a terse form of truths or sentiments, aphorisms lack one essential element; they do not contain any instruction of how to achieve or experience the statements they make.

In our modern Age, human's have become inundated with absurd ways of communicating, which are somewhat like aphorisms. This communication is an illogical use of language that conveys no actual experiential reality, but merely conveys some idea unrelated to true reality.

Examples of such absurd aphorism-like statements are the frequent use of phrases meant to convey reality, but in reality, do nothing of the sort. "Black Lives Matter" is one of the most recently familiar. Does this imply that Latin, Native American, Asian lives or any other human life does not matter...that only Black lives matter? The phrase is absurd in that, as a species, everyone, at least on some level, knows that all lives matter, thus a truer statement is that "All Lives Matter." Aphorisms or idioms, such as this one, is the root cause for the separation and isolation of human beings one from another.

Separating humans into groups based on some characteristic, is the beginning of the creation of "other" or "not like everyone else." This is the exact kind of separationist thinking that the Nazis employed to isolate the characteristics of Jewish people. There exist many examples throughout history of separation of humans, and even in our own era with South African Apartheid; the separation of Japanese people in the United States during World War 2. If we are not careful, such separatist movements, such as Black Lives Matter, can devolve into Nazi-like thinking over time.

There can be no beneficial purpose for the separation of humankind on any level. Absurdity such as social movements, becomes common, and through constant use, such frivolous combinations of words are adopted as some sort of a standard. In linguistic terms this is known as the Illusory Truth Effect.

Idioms have been used like this for centuries. An idiom is a phrase or expression that typically presents a figurative, non-literal meaning attached to the phrase. An idiom's figurative meaning is different from the actual real or literal meaning. "Energy crisis," "ecological crisis," "jobless employees," "raining cats & dogs," and so on, are absurd uses of language that do not convey reality. How can energy or ecology be in crisis? If one is an employee how can they be jobless? Really, cats and dogs are falling from the sky?

A playful example of absurd language usage is the idiom "castles in the air." Using this idiom, there is an old joke that asks what the difference is between a neurotic, a psychotic and a psychiatrist? The neurotic builds the castle in the air, the psychotic lives in the castle, and the psychiatrist gets the rent.

**Critical Thinking aims to arrive
at the truth - but how reliable
is our perception of 'reality'?**



The phrase "making peace with the past" is an idiom. How exactly does one 'make' peace with the past? This is another aphorism-like idiom that does not actually convey reality. How, exactly, is making peace with the past achieved? Does this involve time travel? Is it achieved by merely making an announcement? What does 'making peace' even mean? In the context of examining how our past experiences influence our perceptions, does 'making peace' simply involve manufacturing some alternative way of thinking? If it were only that easy or simple.

In the context of discovering how your past influences you, the phrase 'making peace' does not quite fit with a solution. While 'making peace' might be a part of discovering the elements of our memories, 'making peace,' involves finding a path, your path, in order to 'come to terms' with the past, which is responsible for your present perceptions, opinions, and beliefs.

The Thing About Realistic Perspective

The phrase: ‘realistic perspective,’ is missing the same essential elements as aphorisms. What is a realistic perspective and how do you know when your perspective is in fact real? Reflecting on the past is essential, but if you are reflecting on the past with incorrect perspectives, it is likely that you will only come full circle, right back to being unable to identify the elements that cause your present stress, anger, fear, and behavior.



All perspectives depend upon our perceptions. The difference between a perspective and a perception is not always easy to identify. Your perspective and perception form your ‘point of view.’ In simple terms: Perspective is a point of view, whereas perception is an individual’s interpretation of things. Ahhh... now here is an element that thus far has not been mentioned: **Interpretation.**

So, perception is an understanding that a person gains through awareness or lack thereof. So, when considering our perception of things, we need to go a little deeper to understand its meaning. Perception is not about completely following a certain point of view, it is more about the meaning that we attach to those perceptions.

Perception, therefore, refers to your own interpretation of things. Perception of certain events develop based on different experiences, and based on our direct experiences we create an interpretation. Because our perception is the result of our own interpretation, we tend to believe our own insight. This is so, particularly when our perceptions are anchored to long-term memories of specific events containing emotional

experiences. But, are these perceptions correct? What is the foundation of your perception and how much of your perception is influenced by emotion or social consensus?

Experiencing someone else’s past behavior, such as an alcoholic parent, we have the same responses at present, which are based on the interpretation of those past experiences. However, this is an interpretation that is not necessarily connected to the present. But, we are stuck in this mode of response because we never take the time to uncover the connecting root causes. Our present perspective remains stuck in our interpretation of past experiences.

Just Let it Go?

Again, what does this mean? ‘Accepting your past,’ implies what-exactly? Do you simply accept your past bad behavior and chalk it up to ignorance? Do you accept that your childhood experiences accounts for your own current bad conduct now, leaving it at that? Many New Age philosophies market the phrase to “just let go” or “let go, and let live.” But, this strategy doesn’t seem to offer any lasting benefit.

But, answering the question of whether or not we should just accept our past, leaving it there, in the past, is simpler than it may seem. First, if we truly want to understand how our past influences our present life, you must agree to have an open mind and an open heart with yourself. In other words, when contemplating or reflecting on the particular elements of our past, put aside the pre-conceived beliefs and opinions about yourself.

Let's try some analysis. Attachment is at the root of clinging to your past. Attachment and clinging are rooted in the false belief in a separate self. Mindfulness through the practice of meditation is a process of recognizing the reality of the false self.

Now, this is not to say that you don’t exist. Of course, you exist. However, you don’t exist in the way that you believe you do. Discovering who you actually are is what the Buddha focused on. He understood that ultimately the cause of unhappiness is our dissatisfaction with life.



He taught that root cause of this dissatisfaction with life, is that we don't know who we are. The "I" that we envision, that we believe we are, is something within us and everything else in out there somewhere. This is the abysmal illusion that keeps us trapped in a cycle of never-ending suffering. We cling to things, become attached to things, and do not really know exactly why. It is our insecurities; our not knowing; our not knowing how to identify them, that keeps us locked into the cycles of dissatisfaction, disappointment and our ultimate unhappiness.

Learning how to accept the things we are attached to is difficult to do, particularly when we cling to things such strong ego-based emotions as; "But, she did that to me. She is to blame." "It's because of my father's alcoholism that I am the way I am." "I was not popular in school. The kids teased me because... [whatever the case]."⁶ Put away those old perspectives that you have been clinging to for ages. Difficult as it may be, it is essential that you put aside the emotions that anchor you to your past.

Albert Einstein once said that if he had one hour to solve a problem, he would spend 55 minutes formulating the right question. His point was that if he could come up with the right question, it would only take him 5 minutes to solve the problem.

A better question to ask yourself is: "Do I just acknowledge my past?" 'Accepting' our past requires emotional and psychological intelligence. Acceptance implies that we agree with something. So, initially, when examining the elements of our past experiences and how they effect our life at present, we are not actually in a position to 'accept' anything, particularly if we are not sure of the reasons behind our perceptions or why we hang on to the effects of past events.

Acknowledgment on the other hand, means that we simply confirm the existence of the events of the past, without any emotional, judgmental or psychological baggage. Now, accepting "what" it is that we acknowledge is another thing altogether. In other words, you can acknowledge certain events, and simply accept their existence.

Going a step further, we can label certain events, but here is where caution is recommended. Labeling past events that may affect our present quality of life is okay, so long as the label does not convey your point-of-view, opinions or emotional attachments. This would defeat the purpose of preparing yourself to examine the connective elements of your perceptions associated with past events.

Ignoring past events by refusing to think about them isn't correct either. Neither does maintaining a detached acceptance of past events and experiences provide any lasting benefit. I can't imagine asking or telling someone to embrace and accept their child abuse so they can live happily in the present. Counsel such as: "Just give yourself the permission to move forward," means nothing in practical terms. Does this mean embracing and accepting the alcoholic parent who beat the living daylights out of you, making your young life a living hell? This sort of counseling is, at best, hollow, at worse destructive.

⁶ Dhammapada Yamakavagga "He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me." Those who harbor such thoughts do not still their hatred. "He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me." Those who do not harbor such thoughts still their hatred." <http://www.palikanon.org/index.php/sutta-pitaka/khuddaka-nikaya/99-dhammapada/821-yamakavagga-pairs>

Real healing, real insight, can only come from digging underneath certain events in order to understand how your perceptions (interpretations) were formed, and why we remain attached to the emotions generated by those events. But, why is it necessary to dig up the past? If our perceptions are incorrect this means that they are not real, and do not reflect reality.

Think of yourself as a kind of archaeologist who is on an adventure to discover some ancient artifact or to understand an ancient culture. You have confidence that you are about to discover something wonderful! Your tools are not going to involve a trowel and a brush, rather your tools will be the First Noble Truth and meditation as taught by the Buddha.

*“Therefore, your duty is first, contemplation. Stress should be known. The **cause** by which stress comes into play should be known. The **diversity** in stress should be known. The **result** of stress should be known. The **cessation** of stress should be known. The **path of practice** for the cessation of stress should be known.*

Birth itself is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, grief, regret, pain, distress, and despair are stressful; association with what is not loved is stressful, separation from what is loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. These are the things that we cling to.

*And, **what is the cause** by which stress comes into play? Craving is the cause by which stress comes into play. And, **what is the diversity** in stress? There is major stress and minor, slowly fading and quickly fading. This is called the diversity in stress.*

*And, **what is the result** of stress? There are some cases in which a person overcome with pain, his mind exhausted, grieves, mourns, cries, beats himself up, and becomes bewildered. One overcome with pain, his mind exhausted, comes to search outside of himself, ‘Who knows a way or two to stop this pain?’ I tell you that stress results either in bewilderment or in search of an answer.” -Buddha (Anguttara Nikaya 6.63)⁷*

Here we have the whole formula. Notice that the Buddha mentions that “contemplation” is the first duty? Therefore, your first duty, to yourself, is contemplation or reflection, to identify what it is from your past that is causing you stress. Next, which can be a bit more difficult, is to know (understand) the cause of the stress.

Identifying the Matrix of Your Past



Above is a Tibetan Mind mandala. In many respects, your past is like this mandala: a complex matrix of hidden elements. Hidden elements that have a hand in creating our habits, beliefs, characteristics, opinions, and so on, are discovered through meditation. It's not the people or the situations you experienced in the past that are actually responsible for your present state, but rather it is how you have interpreted past events. Buddha knew what he was talking about when he stated that “mind” precedes everything.⁸

Your brain registers and records the intense events from your past. The intensity can be from a good event or a bad event. While you tend to want to rid yourself of those events that were bad, you can also cling to the good events, sometimes so much so that we stunt our present life experiences.

⁷ First Noble Truth: <https://www.accesstosight.org/lib/study/truths.html#first>

⁸ Mind precedes everything [Yamakavaggo]: Pali “Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā manoseṭṭhā manomayā.” Manopubbaṅgamā” Pali

मनोपुब्बङ्गमा Def “Directed by mind” | [https://nanda.online-dhamma.net/tipitaka/sutta/khuddaka/dhammapada/dhp-contrast-](https://nanda.online-dhamma.net/tipitaka/sutta/khuddaka/dhammapada/dhp-contrast-reading/dhp-contrast-reading-en-chap01/)

reading/dhp-contrast-reading-en-chap01/ | See also: <https://buddhism.redzambala.com/dhammapada/dhammapada-1-yamaka-vagga.html>

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, in *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (Parallax Press, 1998, p. 50):

"The source of our perception, our way of seeing, lies in our store-consciousness. If ten people look at a cloud, there will be ten different perceptions of it. Whether it is perceived as a dog, a hammer, or a coat depends on our mind—our sadness, our memories, our anger. Our perceptions carry with them all the errors of subjectivity."

Buddha provided instruction for recognizing our errors of subjectivity through deeper teachings contained in the third series of the Tipitaka known as the Abhidhamma. The Abhidhamma records the Buddha's analysis of mental faculties and elements of human beings. It is within the Abhidhamma that we encounter a concept called "samaya" (time, instance, occasion, conjunction of circumstances), which denotes a starting point for mental analysis and contemplation.

"The Buddha succeeded in reducing this immediate occasion of a single act of cognition to a single moment of consciousness (a single thought), which, in its subtlety and evanescence, cannot be observed directly and separately, by a mind untrained in introspective meditation [such as Vipassana]."

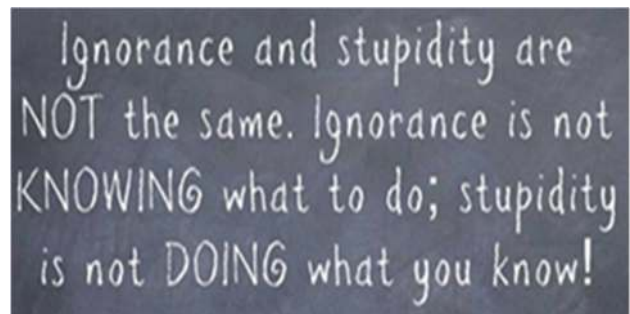
Just as the microscopic living beings in the microcosm of a drop of water become visible only through a microscope, so too the exceedingly short-lived processes in the world of mind (consciousness) become comprehensible only with the help of a very subtle instrument of mental scrutiny, which can only be obtained as a result of meditative training. Without introspective mindfulness or attention (sati)⁹ that is acquired through meditative absorption, such delicate mental examination is not possible."¹⁰

Focused examination, without meditative preparation, usually draws on a series of incomplete or fragmentary thought moments rather than specific experiences. With cautious and introspective use of such information, you can at least begin to examine the elements of past experiences that influence your present beliefs, opinions, behaviors, responses and actions.

Pondering the past allows us space to acknowledge what we have experienced. Such pondering does not mean that we only focus on negative experiences. All experiences shape why we are the way we are, good and bad. Doing this allows us to see clearly the things we cling to, and to those experiences of which we have an aversion.

Depression, for example, is often experienced as emotional pain, but without any identifiable context. You are not certain or you are completely in the dark from where your dissatisfaction or depression originates. Identifying the root cause of such things, without knowing where they originate from, is most certainly a matrix, which can be a difficult one to unravel. Again, at times, particularly when contemplating your past, you may feel that there were experiences where you had no choice in the matter. It may not seem so, but thinking that you had no choice in a matter is simply ignorance of the options available.

Unfortunately, feelings of having no choice but to experience something unpleasant, indicates that you are blocking full knowledge of the experience. It is our negative experiences that really contain a lot of influential power and energy, but are valuable resources for knowing yourself. Please do not confuse ignorance with stupidity. Ignorance means that you do not know what you do not know. Stupidity is knowing, but not acting in accord with that knowledge.



⁹ Sati: Pali सति "Memory, recollection, fixing the mind strongly upon any subject, attention, attentiveness, thought, reflection, consciousness." https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=sati&searchhws=yes&matchtype=exact

¹⁰ Analysis of Consciousness: Abhidhamma: <http://www.buddhanet.net/abhidh05.htm>

It is likely that you actually did not have a choice in the matter of what or how you experienced what you did, especially as a child. Your present perceptions have had years to mature, and at times fester with feelings of anger, guilt, regret, frustration, sadness, and so on.

Think about how the memory of your experiences may have evolved, particularly if those experiences were misinterpreted in some way. When negative experiences are involved, there is a much higher probability that our perspectives become detached from the actual reality of an event over time.

Daily exposure to the stressors of living; keeping up with the tidal wave of life maintenance tasks, debt, social pressures, and so on, we tend to detach from the things that really matter; happiness, calmness, and feeling grounded.

It's easy enough to identify certain, what I call "matrix markers," when it comes to childhood experiences. But, knowing how we interpreted these and how we are influenced by them as an adult is another story altogether. For example: A child that has been physically or emotionally abused, tends to have self-esteem issues. Children that grow up in financially insecure environments, as adults, sometimes develop intense ambition and competitiveness in order to protect themselves from re-experiencing those childhood interpretations of poverty.

Because emotion is involved, we develop certain personality characteristics that have their roots in either positive experiences, so we cling to them, or negative experiences, and so we cling to the aversion of them. We are not always aware of why we suffer because we cling to something pleasant or desired. Neither are we always aware of why we suffer because we have an aversion to something. We don't always see that we are constantly trying to avoid that to which we are averse. Either way, we continuously seek ways to satisfy something we believe we need. This is desire.



But, how do you know that "what" you know is real or correct? How can you know whether or not you misinterpreted your past experiences? Is there any way to discover whether you have? Not knowing the answer to this question is simply ignorance. Becoming aware that there is a way out of the influences of the past, through the application of meditation, is a realistic path, and is the first step toward uncovering our ignorance, but choosing to do nothing, is stupidity.

Knowing whether or not you have misinterpreted your past experiences or that you have developed incorrect perceptions can be discovered, right now. Pick one particularly troublesome event from your past; one that persistently revisits you, and ask yourself this question: 'Have the perceptions I hold of my past helped me to correct my life at present?'

If the answer is no or you do not know, it is likely that your interpretation of the past experience has created an incorrect perception. Alternatively, since you don't know whether or not your interpretations of your past are correct, then you need to learn out 'how' find out.

Be mindful that the phrase "interpretations of your past" because it does **not** mean a chronological interpretation of events. When an event took place isn't as important as the emotions and feelings that the event generated. Our perceptions are truly a matrix, intertwined with memories, reminders, and disappointments, often times compounded with confusion and frustration.

In order to begin to unravel this matrix, you need to create a mental free space around it. How this is accomplished is through meditation, but not the type of meditation that is marked by the meaningless exercise of relaxing in a sitting position while listening to New Age music or merely an exercise in relaxation.

The type of meditation that is required for the purpose of unravelling the matrix of perceptions is focused meditation. Meditating in a quiet space with no distractions allows you to create a mental space where you can develop an insight about the perceptions you hold.

When you don't know how to meditate correctly you experience frustration because the meditation doesn't seem to work. Your perception of how meditation works is incorrect. The result of this is that you are simply inclined to return to your habitual confusion about why you cannot shake influences linked to your past.

Experimentation with meditation without a clear understanding of why you are doing it and how you are supposed to do it, is nothing less than dangerous. Why? Because you run the risk of simply supporting and intensifying the cycle of confusion and frustration to the degree that you end up abandoning your efforts, feeling that the challenge is too great. When this happens, you tend to justify a decision to abandon your efforts. In essence, you lose confidence in meditation or worse, you lose confidence in yourself. Incorrect, pre-conceived notions of what meditation is and what it is for, do not match the results you expect. "Why am I even doing this? It's all just a bunch of spiritual mumbo-jumbo."

When beginning on this journey, you must be able to understand that it is normal to be afraid of broadening, changing or reorganizing your perceptions. This is why creating an open mental space is important. You cannot allow fresh chaos to enter into your thoughts, but if it does, there is a way to counteract this by acknowledging the chaotic thinking, without judgement, allowing it to diminish into your focus on the breath.

In the modern world, meditation is all too often viewed as a playfully simple way of calming our anxieties. Alteration of your consciousness, uncovering hidden emotions, unleashing memories, while seeming familiar to you, are not things to take lightly or playfully at all.



Knowledge, confidence, willpower, concentration, and mindfulness are powerful tools. These things are present in each person, but one needs an understanding of how to use them in order to affect any benefit. Learning how to develop these tools can only be discovered through the silence of meditation. For it is through meditation that one gains a precise knowledge into the perception of reality as it actually is.

Trust and the Lack of Trust

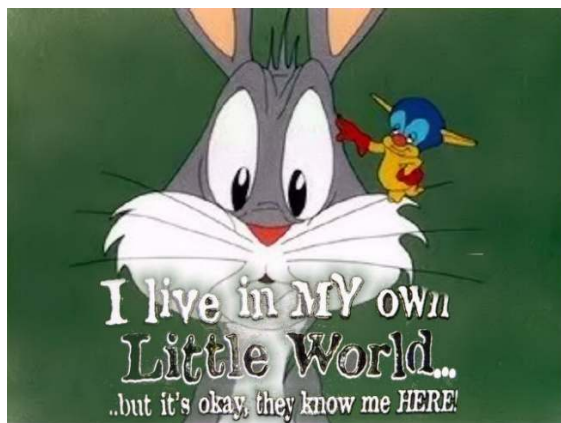
The importance of trust cannot be overemphasized when it comes to uncovering the truth about the nature of your own perceptions. Confusion and frustration about the events of your past and how those events have affected you is quite common. In many ways, the fact that we cannot seem to work things out for ourselves causes us to develop a lack of trust in our own abilities to do so. A lack of trust also diminishes our confidence and willpower.

Willpower is needed in order to keep taking the medicine (meditation), which will eventually heal our misperceptions about the past. Trust in your willpower helps you to accept and understand that fixing yourself cannot be accomplished all at once. This is made more difficult in our instant world where there is little threshold for anticipation.

To a large extent, nearly everything in our World can be experienced instantly without any necessity for anticipation. So, allow the idea that results will take time to settle in you. Meditation, mindfulness and concentration keeps the quiet mental space open and receptive. In many respects, the raw material world, as-well-as your perceptions of feelings and emotions, are created and shaped by your interpretations. While we may, in part, be the creators of our own worlds, what are the things from your past that influence the way you live, and the choices you make, how you feel, and how you react?

In order to develop true trust in yourself, and your own abilities to uncover the nature of your perceptions, you need to set the stage. If necessity is driving you to embark on this personal journey to discover how your past is affecting you, then you need to mentally create a space...set the stage...to do this. How you do this is simple. Find a quiet moment, sit still, and either say the following out loud or to yourself:

“I acknowledge that I am the creator of my own world, so I take responsibility for my own creation.”



This is not to place blame, but to open a space where you are willing to accept that maybe, just maybe, your interpretations of the past and subsequent perceptions might not be quite as accurate as you believe them to be. This statement that you make to yourself is not an aphorism or some pithy saying, rather it is a firm acknowledgement, and is an agreement you make with yourself.

Aphorisms, pithy sayings or scientific studies aren't worth anything at all, and can only actually just transmit fact or knowledge. This is also true of the Buddha's teachings. Knowledge of the Dhamma only, is just that, only knowledge. Without a way, a method or technique for practical application, all the Dhamma knowledge in the world is useless and powerless to change your life for the better. Collection of knowledge for the sake of collecting can only ever be a pursuit of triviality.

This essay may create a semblance of hope, perhaps even a bit of bubbling excitement, but somewhere in the background, there is also that lingering sense of heaviness and doubt. If this is the case for you, you may be hearing things in your head like: "This all sounds great but I've tried things like this before. Nothing ever works. Why would this be any different?" "Yeah-yeah-yeah...I've heard all of these things before. I think that my problems must be too big for this to work." "I've tried meditation and it did nothing for me." "This stuff seems to work for a while, but things end up going back to the way they were."

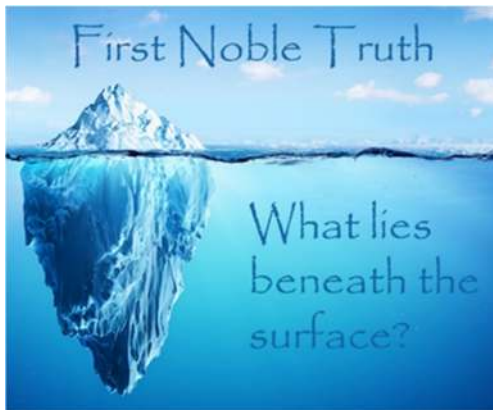
What must be considered is that all of these thoughts (perceptions) are conditioned. The most likely reason that your past efforts didn't seem to do what you thought they would, or delivered what you believed they would, is because you didn't understand the things that were responsible for conditioning your perceptions in the first place.

Initially, without clear knowledge and understanding, you proceeded from a point of ignorance, creating interpretations of past events that formed your current perceptions. When the starting point is from one of ignorance, how can the resulting interpretation be correct...how can the perception you hold be correct? But, this is alright for now.

This natural ignorance eats away at one's trust in oneself. Why meditation didn't seem to work is because you started from a place marked by a lack of knowledge about the reason you decided to meditate in the first place. Proper reasoning and method are critical in order for meditation to work as the Buddha outlined.

The conditioned elements of past events, and your interpretations of them, form the foundation of your present perceptions. Once you can see the conditioned elements that are responsible for your perceptions, your insight starts to change, and begins to sharpen through a clearer ability to understand. You are not so concerned with, as was mentioned earlier, ‘when’ things happened or even ‘how’ they happened in the past, rather you are seeking to understand the “conditions” that created the perceptions you have.

Seeing the conditions is like diving into the ocean and discovering the immense size of an iceberg that exists underneath the surface. Learning about the conditions, and understanding how your perceptions were influenced by them is seeing (discovering) what lies beneath the surface. The surface of what? The surface that experiences the stress, frustration, suffering, and so on, caused by the events of your past. Be mindful that I am not speaking of perceptions in general, rather specific perceptions about your own life.



Mindfulness is more than just meditation, but mindfulness is developed through meditation. Acting, conducting yourself mindfully is a whole body-and-mind awareness of the present moment.

Thich Nhat Hanh said,

“I define mindfulness as the practice of being fully present and alive, body and mind united. Mindfulness is the energy that helps us to know what is going on in the present moment.”

Learning to Anchor in Reality

The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those that speak it.
—George Orwell



What does it mean to understand the conditions? How can you tell whether or not your perceptions are anchored in reality? by examining the conditioning of your perceptions. Gaining the ability to comprehend the elements of

conditioning is only possible with a foundation of accurate thinking, and accurate reflection. Making true statements about actual events results from correct accurate information, and direct experience.

Similar to George Orwell’s statement above, the further you drift away from the truth about your past, the more you will come to hate trying to find it. Each time your efforts meet with failure, the further away you get from the truth, the more you cling to your incorrect, ignorant perceptions. The cycle can be maddening.

Being disconnected from reality is marked by a sense of feeling numb, along with difficulty discovering what is true and what is not. This causes us to become anxious and lethargic; we seem to have no choice but to give up caring about what is true and what is not.

In order to be able to trust yourself, we need to know yourself. One of the supporting components of trust is simplicity, because simplicity fosters confidence. However, truth should not be misinterpreted as blind faith. Truth requires questioning and testing. When you test something yourself, such as the effectiveness and usefulness of the Buddha’s teachings, truth grows, and confidence becomes reliable.

Eventually, through enough testing, you begin to organically strengthen your own inner intuition. Keeping things simple then; you should never allow the questioning trust to become fueled by doubt or inquisitional-like investigation.

“What we believe about ourselves to be true, boils down to our interpretation of the past experiences of our life.”¹¹

Read that again, slowly, and absorb the depth of what that statement actually means. Consider the implications of that statement. Therefore, would it not be beneficial to examine the interpretations you might cling to with regard to various experiences that have influenced you? By examining our interpretations, and what those interpretations are based on, you might discover that certain perceptions you have about yourself simply are not true, entirely correct or completely incorrect.



Re-anchoring yourself to reality means testing beliefs about yourself, and by “your-self” I am referring to your personality, character, behavior and habits. What is this testing and how does it work? First, begin by selecting one thing that you believe about yourself. Fully examine this belief. Next you are going to test whether or not this belief is true.

“How do I do that?” You examine the “conditions” by which your belief has developed. A simple example would be the belief that you always tell the truth...you consider yourself to be an honest person. You believe that you are a truthful person. Next, you set yourself to be mindful of your speech, behavior, and intentions.

Take note of each time that you do not tell the truth for convenience sake. Take note of how many times you have to pause to think about how to say something that isn’t entirely true.

Being mindfully aware of this, you begin to form a clearer picture of who you really are. Next, you contemplate why you felt as though you needed to say something that was not true. Doing this reveals your intent. Repeated intentions to make untruthful statements because of convenience or expediency is an opportunity to discover the conditions behind your behavior. Everything in the Universe is conditioned by something else, the reasons for your behavior is one of them.

Anchoring in reality means acting, and effective action is only possible with perception that is based on reality. Reality-true perception happens by accurate thinking, contemplation and having a good plan.

True statements about your past, and even about the present, result from wise contemplation. This is the foundation of what is meant by the Buddha’s teaching of *yoniso manasikara* (yoh-knee-soh mahn-nah-see-kara), which means that we give something “proper consideration.”¹² What is the most reliable reference for reality? the direct experience of the body. It is the mindfulness of the body that provides the key to anchoring in reality.

What are the strategies for anchoring in reality? Awareness and taking note of experiences and the feelings they generate. The strategy for truthful perception is anchored in truthfulness. In the *Abhidhamma*, the Buddha used the words *yatha*¹³ and *bhutta*¹⁴, which means being aware of the direct relation of actual events that are taking place.

¹¹ Quote *Dipobhasadhamma*

¹² *Yoniso Manasikara: Pali* योनिःसोमनसिकार *Def:* “Fixing one’s attention with a purpose or thoroughly,” proper attention, “having thorough method in one’s thought.”

¹³ *Yatha Pali यथा* *Def:* “As; like; in relation to; according to; in whatever way; just as.”

¹⁴ *Bhuta (see yathabhuta) Def:* “In reality, in truth, really, definitely, absolutely; as ought to be, truthfully, in its real essence. Actual, evident, exact, accurate, genuine.”

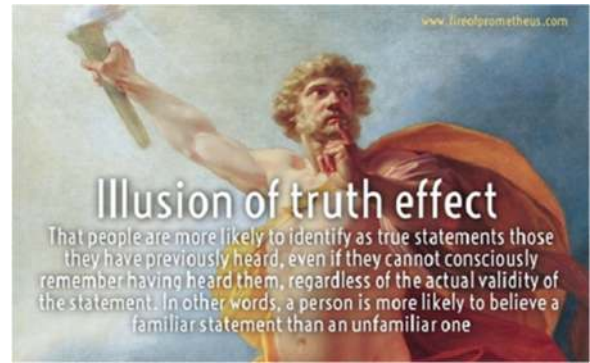
Real things, such as real events, is a process, but they are conditioned processes. Buddha's use of the words *sabhava-dhamma*¹⁵ defines "real things" that are not determined by concepts, but as determined by direct experience through accurate awareness.

Pure experiencing is not possible without truthful speech, which exists only when it relates to real and not invented events. In other words, there is no distortion in the speech. It is in this way that one's speech is directly related to intelligent awareness. Distortion of truth; of the real facts, and real experience, is nothing less than lying, and this is the mark of stupidity.

Most of the time, if you are aware of your speech, you will find that we lie because we fear the consequences of truth or we do not have the ability to grasp reality as it is. In essence then, lying is like an infidelity of the reality of your physical experiences.

Necessary for correcting the balance of one's thinking means sometimes having to force ourselves to avoid logical knowledge that is purely derived from mere concepts. When one's bodily awareness becomes disconnected, we remain ignorant of our own fixed ideas, delusions, and illusions, not seeing how and why we obfuscate, disguise, camouflage, alter, distort, hide and mask what is real and true experience. This results in a kind of derangement of thinking.

When becoming aware, and using the strategies for anchoring in reality, our habitual ways of altering reality begin to fall away and we begin to experience true knowledge, true thought, and true speech. This is when our experiencing becomes anchored in bodily reality; trueness becomes an intrinsic part of who you are. Direct experience is always real, but direct experiences are never true or false. Direct experience is registered by simply noticing what is happening at the moment. Devoid of concepts, they are raw, and stark experience; noticing what is happening right at the moment it is happening.



Illusory Truth Effect, Truthiness & Lying

Illusory Truth Effect (I.T.E.) is a very real psychological state of mind that was first identified in the late 1970s.¹⁶ Basically, I.T.E. is a mental pattern causing our brains to perceive something to be true when we hear it repeated frequently and persistently, without additional evidence provided for the claim.

Over the last one-hundred years or so, our entire systems of business, religion, economics, and so on, are based on lies, the content and context of which are designed to manipulate perception, mostly for the sake of some form of profit. However, the most destructive consequence of this repetitious lie-based-system is large scale alienation from reality, which effects all levels of true and real experience.

Will we ever be able to forget the most repeated statement of 2020: "This election was rigged?" This statement became such a part of our everyday events, and was repeated so many times, that people began to believe that it was true. Although this claim was shown to be false, many continue to believe it to be true long after it was proven to be false. But, just because something is repeated several times, we perceive it as more believable, regardless of whether it is objectively true or not, based on the lack of evidence supporting it! This is a perfect example of the Illusory Truth Effect.

¹⁵ *Sabhadhamma Pali* सभावधम्म *Def:* "Principle of nature"

¹⁶ **Illusory Truth Effect Study:** Hasher, Lynn; Goldstein, David; Toppino, Thomas (1977). "Frequency and the conference of referential validity" (PDF). *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*. 16 (1): 107–112. doi:10.1016/S0022-5371(77)80012

The I.T.E. effect is well-supported by scientific research, as shown by an analysis of 51 academic studies on this phenomenon published in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*.¹⁷ Regardless of whether a statement is false or true, the more we hear it, the more likely we are to believe it.

Perhaps the most troubling finding is that “Knowledge Does Not Protect Against Illusory Truth,” which is the title and topic of a peer-reviewed article published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*.¹⁸

Advertisers rely heavily on the Illusory Truth Effect. Research published in the *Journal of Advertising* shows that the industry motivates people to purchase products by repeating the claimed benefits of the product, rather than by providing any evidence that the product actually does what is claimed. It is not exactly lying, but close enough, it is a deceptive practice. For example, commercials, as a rule of advertising, never focus on providing additional evidence of a product’s benefit, but simply repeats *ad nauseum*, how well the product works.

Moreover, the illusory truth effect is magnified by advertisements that prime consumers to trust their feelings, rather than their reason. Additionally, in these studies it was revealed that some repeat participants formed false memories; memories of false information that they believed was the truth.

Who hasn’t seen or heard at least one annoying Liberty Mutual Insurance Company commercial? The ads are repeated so often, in so many ways, and from so many sources, if anyone were to stand up in a crowd and say “Liberty-Liberty-Liberty, three times in rapid succession, a lot of people, if not most, would know exactly to what the person is referring.

Companies such as this are not interested in telling people about the quality of their product, but rather firmly planting their company names or product names into the heads of consumers. This is why companies spend millions on the creation of memorable little ditties that get stuck in your head. Can you say, “Oh, oh, oh, Otezla?”

Despite Liberty Mutual Insurance Company’s advertising blitz, rating organizations such as Consumer Reports; the American Association for Justice (AAJ), and the *National Law Review*, listed Liberty Mutual Insurance Company as one of the worst companies in America.¹⁹ But, you would not be able to derive that from their tidal wave of advertising. While **not** focusing on what is most important, i.e. the quality of their product, they focus the consumer on only “paying for what you need,” inferring to policy holder’s that the company is on your side. Lies? not quite. Deception...getting closer. Manipulation...bingo! This is an example of intense use of I.T.E.



While this psychological tactic is used by politicians, lawyers, drug companies, advertising companies, religions, and so on, the truth is we all too frequently do it to ourselves. We might know of relatives or close acquaintances that have invented stories and events about their lives.

¹⁷ *Personality and Social Psychology Review: Study*

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40730710_The_Truth_About_the_Truth_A_Meta-Analytic_Review_of_the_Truth_Effect

¹⁸ Knowledge Does Not Protect Against Illusory Truth: <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/xge-0000098.pdf>

¹⁹ **Worst Insurance Company in America:** <https://richardhollawell.com/insurance-companies/top-10-worst-car-insurance-companies-in-2019/> | <https://www.freeadvice.com/legal/liberty-mutual-as-one-of-ten-worst-insurance-companies-in-america/> | <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/11-worst-insurance-companies>

While knowing these stories to be false, through sheer repetition, they actually create a false memory. Creating false memories has many root causes, but according to Psychology Today²⁰ and Elizabeth Loftus at the University of Washington:²¹

“Human memory is pliable and easy to manipulate. A distorted memory or the introduction of later, false information can affect how we recall events we experienced firsthand. A person’s existing knowledge can impede and obstructs their own memory, leading to a newly formed, cobbled-together recollection that does not accurately reflect reality. Also, under certain circumstances, a person can be given false information and be convinced to believe that an event that never occurred actually did.”

Let’s say for example, you had a traumatic childhood. You didn’t like your family. There is something in your past you are not proud of; a relationship gone very wrong perhaps. There could be any one of a number of reasons why we would like to change our past, but we can’t. In our ever increasingly mobile society, we often get the opportunity to move far away from the geographic place of our unwanted past. This provides us with the possibility of being able to start over, turn over a new leaf, as it were; be that person we always envisioned we could be, far away from our past relationships and mistakes. So, we set about to change our past for the sake of the present. We might invent education, where we lived, how we lived, what we did, even our nationality or the country of our origin.

I have personally met many persons who immigrated to the U.S. from Iran. But, because of the stigmatism associated with Iran in the US, these people identify themselves as being from Persia. However, Iran has not been Persia for 87 years, officially, since 1935.²²

“Our emotions predispose us to be increasingly comfortable with such repeated claims, and as a result they will feel subjectively true, despite not being objectively true. By noticing such repetitions, we and others can be empowered to apply our own intentional reasoning to avoid being fooled.”

*This approach is informed by the broader research-based approach of de-anchoring, a method of combating false intuitions. The idea of de-anchoring is to push back against our subjective feelings when they steer us to evaluate reality inaccurately, and push back harder, seems intuitive to us, as we cannot trust our own intuitions, which are anchored toward comfort instead of reality.”*²³

Considering that scientific research shows that the brain is susceptible to false information via repetition, and that we are able to create our own false memories, does it not stand to reason that in order to avoid the complications that inevitably follow, we need to be ever more mindful and fastidious about the content of information that we think is truth.²⁴

A close relative of I.T.E. is Truthiness, a word originally coined by Stephen Colbert, and accepted by the American Dialect Society and Merriam-Webster. Truthiness is the belief or assertion that a particular statement is true based on the intuition or perceptions of some individual or individuals, **without** regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts.

Truthiness can range from ignorant assertions of falsehoods to deliberate duplicity or propaganda purposely intended to sway opinions.²⁵ In our modern era of misinformation, and Illusory Truths, truthiness is unfortunately a reality, and growing. People are inclined to accept something as fact because it sounds true, because of who said it, or because they have a gut feeling that some claim is true.

²⁰ False Memories: Psychology Today : <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/false-memories>

²¹ **Creating False Memories**, Loftus: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/13946572_Creating_False_Memories

²² **When Persia Became Iran**: <https://historyofyesterday.com/when-did-persia-become-iran-b10d639f5b71>

²³ **The Effects of Illusory Truth**: Tsipursky, Gleb, The Human Prospect, vol. 6, no. 2, Spring/Summer 2017, pp. 32–41

²⁴ **Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News**: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2958246

²⁵ Truthiness: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>

The purpose and reasoning behind including all of this seemingly unrelated information is to show that these things most definitely relate to how believe what they believe, including you. All of this information highlights the fact that human beings are very susceptible to false information, whether they create it themselves or access it from somewhere else.

The mind-bending manipulation of information in our present time bleeds over into our personal lives. We are not sure of what is true and what is not...even if it comes from the Buddha. Are we as quick and fastidious about finding out for ourselves whether or not something is true, just as quickly as we allow ourselves to believe something that is false? Why do we accept falsehood, even about ourselves, so readily? Repetition. How is this possible when the manipulation of information, falsehood, illusion of truth, and truthiness, is advancing in tidal wave proportions?

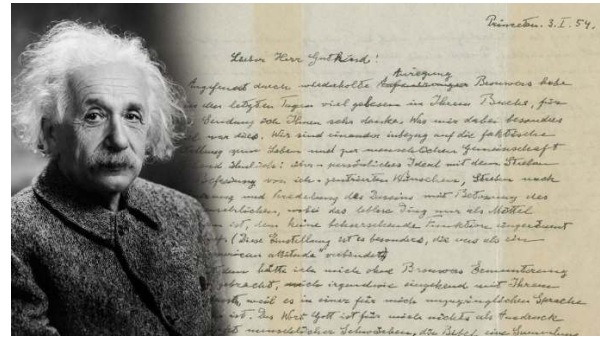
Compare all of the information in this section with what the Buddha had to say about truth and those who lie.

*“What is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter: This is called right speech.”*²⁶

*“For the person who transgresses in one thing, I tell you, there is no evil deed that is not to be done. Which one thing? This: the telling of a deliberate lie.”*²⁷

In the Ambalaṭṭhikā Rāhulovāda Sutta (MN 61)²⁸ Buddha used the analogy of a bowl of water to explain the consequence of lying. Speaking to his son, Rahula, Buddha dumped out some water remaining in a bowl. The purpose of the Buddha’s teaching in this way was to emphasize just how empty and hollow is such a person who tells lies. So, whether we tell ourselves lies about our own past or tell such lies to others, the consequence is a hollowness, devoid of virtue, and empty.

Coming to Grips with Your Past



In a letter he wrote to a grieving father in 1954, Albert Einstein summed up the task for all human beings:

“A human being is a part of the whole called “The Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest; a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening the circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty.”

As Einstein said, we need to widen our circle of understanding and compassion. Without compassion and understanding for yourself and the reasons that you suffer, makes it impossible to have true compassion and understanding for others. You have to be able to envision compassion and understanding. If you are unable or do not know that you lack these things, how can you realistically do so for others?

Coming to grips with your past, and how your interpretation of it effects your present life, is an exercise in getting unstuck. Getting unstuck does not mean finding a way to ignore or eradicate the emotions connected to past events, but learning how to see them, and hold them without the emotional or perceptual attachments.

²⁶ Right Speech: Samyutta Nikaya 45.8

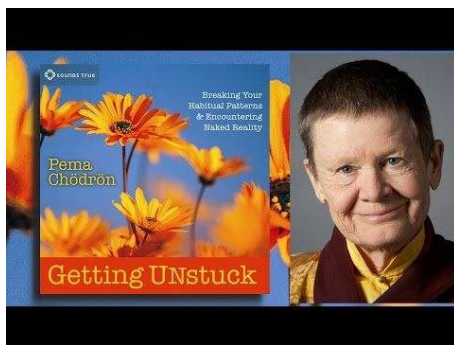
²⁷ Itivuttaka Sutta 25

²⁸ Ambalaṭṭhikā Rāhulovāda Sutta (MN 61)

Reluctance to embark on this task generally stems from the fact that we have become accustomed to living within the boundaries of our own incorrect interpretations of our past. By whatever means, whatever stories we tell ourselves, we are comfortable with our own ignorance. We don't want to change. After all, you seem to be doing alright accepting things as you have interpreted them. Right? So, you are blissfully happy. Not a care in the world have you.

We create the ground, the anchor that is familiar to us, and we convince ourselves it is safe there. Whenever we are forced to change something, we panic a bit, and hastily seek to hang on to our familiar ground.

A useful teaching in the Mahayana tradition, originally formulated by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, outlines three conditions that mark the life of every human being.²⁹ The first mark is form. When our ground is threatened we look for any form of external comfort or safety. We are looking for our familiar ground. In reality we seek a method of escape rather than examining the cause of our fear, frustration, anger, and so on. How do we fill up the space that is caused by the threat of losing ground? As American Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron states:



“When we become addicted to the lord of form, we are creating the causes AND conditions of our own suffering. Instead, the very feelings we are trying to escape from, get stronger.”

The second mark is speech and how we misuse it to create a sense of security and certainty about the nature of reality, even if that reality is based on incorrect interpretations. We use our speech to put up security fences around our beliefs so nothing, not no one, not no how, can change our perspectives.

All sorts of sources are used for this. Political, philosophical, environmental, ecological, religious, spiritual, political correctness, racial biases, traditional customs and cultures, and intellectualism, are misused in order to firm up evidence and support for our beliefs.

What if we didn't have these things to bolster and support our interpretations, points of view, perceptions, what would be left? Where is the self? Perhaps a reminder from the lyrics of one of the greatest songs ever written, should be inserted here.

IMAGINE
John Lennon



*Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today.*

*Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace.*

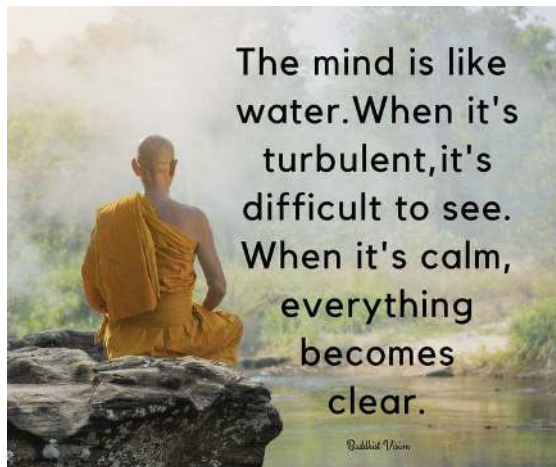
*Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world.* ³⁰

Belief and sticking with what we think is the correct interpretation of our past, we become very narrow minded and prejudiced toward the truth. In many respects, problems stem less from our beliefs themselves than how we use those beliefs to secure ourselves; to secure ground, and how we use them to stay stuck in the past.

²⁹ **Spiritual Materialism:** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritual_materialism

³⁰ **Imagine: Lyrics** John Lennon <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/johnlennon/imagine.html>

Awareness of emotions. Encountering our beliefs about our past, and examining our interpretations of them, is sometimes sacrosanct. We believe what we believe, and that is the end of it, even if we are presented with evidence of truth. Whenever our cemented pylons of belief are threatened, we react with righteous indignation. That is a sure sign that you are on the right track. Stay there; examine that. Righteous indignation or indignation of any sort, is a sure sign that you feel threatened in some way.



Now we come to the lord of mind, which employs the most seductive and subtle measures to safeguard our present beliefs. Almost anything can be used to do this, sports, love, reading, eating, drinking, even spiritual practices that block us; distract us, from feeling and experiencing anything uncomfortable. We achieve some level of relief through distracting ourselves away from the things that actually cause us to suffer. All we are doing is delaying the inevitable...suffering.

Beginner meditators often times fall into a rut because they use meditation for the wrong reasons...as an escape rather than a way to understand their emotions. We must secure our own personal territory at the cost of knowledge, insight and understanding. What habitual tactics do you use for avoiding the truth about your life?

What true meditation provides is the key for learning to stop blocking reality by using the ego. What you struggle with, is ordinary human experience, and this is something the Buddha pointed out.

Everything is impermanent. There is nothing that can guarantee that we will never have to suffer at the hands of our emotions. Life is not always going to go your way. Understanding this on a deeper level, through meditation, opens up space in our lives. Instead of anticipating problems, stress, anxiety, sadness, anger and worry, we can instead welcome these when they occur as an opportunity to get to know ourselves on a much more realistic level.

In meditation we can achieve and understanding the depth and level of this impermanence. On some level we all know that things wear out, we age, and our material possessions do not last, and yet, we cannot seem to shake off our emotional connection to these things. No one avoids uncertainty.

Next, we encounter the lord of emotion, ego. Whenever we have thoughts of being incompetent, helpless or hopeless, what are we basing these thoughts on? Some event in a fleeting moment, past experiences that we can't quite put our finger on. While our days should accumulate joy and happiness, why don't they? Do we take ourselves, and our past, too seriously?

Self-importance is harmful in many ways. We believe we are cleverer than others; that somehow, we are blessed by being financially secure. What assumptions do we make about ourselves? Our stronghold of likes and dislikes causes us to live with a narrow perspective of life until, one day, it occurs to us that we are absolutely bored silly. Thus, we end up suffering a whopping dose of dissatisfaction and disappointment.

Buddha was immensely generous by showing us a real escape route. He showed us that we do not have to accept being trapped into an identity box of success or failure, happiness or unhappiness, sadness or anxiety. What if we had no identity at all? What would that mean? Would it mean that we would live in the present, being mindful of each moment that we live, with an ability to see reality as it actually is? You betcha you would.

“To accept that pain is inherent, and to live our lives from this understanding is to create the causes and conditions for happiness.”

-Pema Chodron

Everyone, in one way or other, finds some security, some comforting ground from the imaginary world of our memories. Discomfort and dissatisfaction are found in the same way. But, gaining clear understanding is just another way of saying that we are less likely subject to self-deception. And, as was mentioned in an earlier paragraph, “true meditation provides the key for learning to stop blocking reality by using the ego.” When we struggle against our past and the emotions we allow them to create, we inadvertently reject the only source of true wisdom we have in connection with our past.

Your Internal Movie, the Story Line & the Script



What is your story line? What is the script that you stick to that tells your story? What stories do you tell yourself to “fix” your emotions in connection with your past? Does this story line involve a bit of manipulation of the truth or what you believe is the truth? What do you suppose would happen if you paused the movie and decided to edit the script? How many times have you heard yourself or someone else say, “If I only knew then what I know now?” Our habitual patterns and ways of thinking are so ingrained that we never take the opportunity to question the validity of our own story.

It cannot be stressed enough that awareness is key, and the door that opens to awareness is proper meditation. If your meditation practice has actually done nothing to change your life, other than the occasional moment of calm, then you are not meditating correctly. Blind spots that prevent us from grasping the reality of our life’s issues from one source, and that source is ignorance.

We have developed many diverse ways in which we put up barriers from the emotions we might experience that are rooted in our past. But, this is where the wisdom is to be found. We all have a rich well of wisdom in our emotions. Rather than shutting down whenever we encounter them, be aware of the emotion; examine why it exists, and from where it comes. This very act is exercising one’s inherent wisdom.

Through applying correct meditation, you begin to experience more instances of joy that your circumstances are in fact workable. With time, you automatically begin to experience a sense of confidence that you are in the right track. The reason for this is that you begin to experience the reality of creating the causes and conditions for your own happiness; a kind of happiness that is more solid rather than fleeting moments of contrived comfort.

So, how important is your past? It contains all of the experiences you have had, good and bad. Your past contains all the information about you, and is the blueprint of who you are right now. While so many so-called spiritual advisers and teachers talk of “just letting go,” the Buddha emphasized that the past is where we will find the wisdom of the present. Again, Buddha was adamant about chasing after the past, because there was no benefit in trying to duplicate the good things or run away from the bad things.

With the courage and compassion that is to be discovered through correct meditation, we can evolve from the me that seeks bits and pieces of comfort, to a person that is awake and who is not so frightened of what the future holds...for it is you that holds the quality of your future.

May you have the courage to embark on your journey of discovery and throw off the shackles of ignorance. Learn who it is that was born. It is my wish that you have experienced some clarity and knowledge, as well as joy and comfort from this essay.

“A person who is mentally concentrated is able to see things according to reality.”

— Buddha
(Samyutta Nikaya 10.22)